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New Media and the Warfighter

Workshop Initial Impressions[1]

By Dennis M. Murphy

Journalists...“streamed” or broadcast their reports…as they covered the movement of troops and the rocketing of villages....Such information was [once] the stuff of military intelligence....Now it has become the stuff of everyday journalism. The camera and the computer have become weapons of war.

—Marvin Kalb, Harvard University, on the Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006

Superiority in the physical environment is of little value unless it can be translated into an advantage in the information environment.

—Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, “The Transformation of Strategic Affairs”

The United States Army War College in cooperation with The SecDev Group conducted an information effects workshop from 15 January to 17 January 2008 at the Collins Center for Strategic Leadership, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

BACKGROUND

Managing media and “information effects” is a hallmark of the current geo-strategic environment in which the U.S. military fights. The global information revolution and rapid spread of the Internet and other digital media have leveled the playing field between nation-states, non-state actors, multinational corporations and individuals. Anyone armed with mobile technologies such as a camera cell phone and access to the Internet is capable of affecting strategic outcomes at very low cost, using a minimal information infrastructure. The U.S. military has increasingly leveraged advances in information technology to gain advantages in the modern battlefield and to tell their story on a macro level, but has just recently begun to exploit the exploding technology realm at the micro level by co-opting the use of YouTube and blogs to help achieve objectives. Clearly, managing the “message” while controlling the necessary technological “means” represent critical challenges in today’s military operating environment.

The workshop centered on how information effects impact the achievement of national and military objectives with focus on the importance of “new media” (and related cyber-ops capabilities). Broadly, new media has been described as “that combustible mix of 24/7 cable news, call-in radio and television programs, Internet bloggers and online websites, cell phones and iPods” (Kalb, Harvard Report). But this menu limits the definition to present day capabilities and is quickly outdated given expected technological advances. A more timeless definition should consider new media as any capability that empowers a broad range of actors (individuals through nation-states) to create and disseminate near-real time or real time information with the ability to affect a broad (regional or worldwide) audience using global standardized communications technologies such as the Internet as unifying platforms. New media is enabled

1. Portions of this issue paper are extracted from case studies developed by Rafal Rohozinski for the workshop. The workshop was conducted under Chatham House rules of non-attribution to allow free flow of dialog among participants.

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by "digital multi-modality," where content produced in one form can be easily and rapidly edited and repackaged and transmitted in real time across many different forms of media.

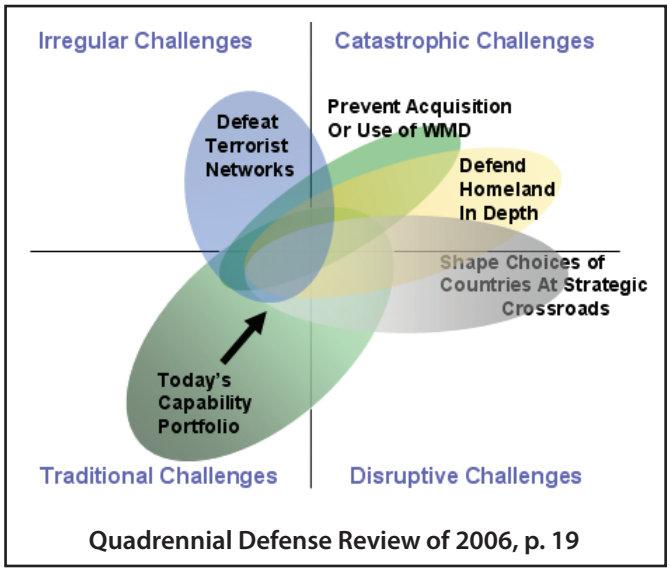
The workshop considered how new media and related cyber-ops capabilities affect the warfighters' perspectives, objectives and actions. The breakout groups used the July 2006 "33 Day War" between Israel and Hezbollah as a case study vehicle to drive discussion, answer questions and apply lessons learned to current U.S. and coalition operations. The objective of the workshop was to investigate the conditions that enable or restrict the warfighter's ability to exploit new media as capability in support of achieving military objectives and to counter the effective use of new media by adversaries.

WORKSHOP DESIGN

The workshop brought together an international audience of military, national security community and intelligence community leaders as well as experts from academia. It was conducted over the course of three days and began with a plenary session and a dinner and keynote speech by a senior warfighter to set the stage for the subsequent presentations and discussions. Day two included additional plenary presentations to establish a foundation of understanding followed by breakout groups which addressed the key issues involved in order to satisfy workshop objectives. Day three was devoted to briefing the recommendations, observations and insights gained from the breakout groups to the plenary group.

WHY THIS WORKSHOP…AND WHY NOW?

The Department of Defense Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) of 2006 reemphasized that future conflict will fall into one of four quadrants: traditional challenges; irregular challenges; catastrophic challenges or; disruptive challenges. It further notes that today's military capabilities are focused toward traditional warfare, while moving in the future toward the center of the graph to address multiple (or hybrid) threats. With this in mind, workshop organizers asked the following questions: if current military operations represent a generational struggle (alternately referred to as the "long war" by some) what will the next campaign look like and; does the shift of capabilities to address multiple and hybrid threats include a shift of information capabilities? Is the United States considering new media capabilities while still understanding the role of traditional media? The 33 Day War, when used as a case study, provides insights that address these questions. Importantly, it allows focus on the next war, as opposed to the traditional (but flawed) focus on the last (or current) war.



Quadrennial Defense Review of 2006, p. 19

Hezbollah provided the "multiple" challenges to Israel that the QDR sees U.S. capabilities moving to confront. Hezbollah is neither a regular Army nor a guerilla force in the traditional sense. It in fact is a hybrid…something in between. As a political entity with a military wing it plays a large role in providing services to sectors of the Lebanese population. During the war, Hezbollah expertly leveraged new media capabilities, and defended against Israeli use while maintaining excellent operations security (OPSEC). Adversaries of the United States can learn much from the Hezbollah experience. The United States, on the other hand, must consider whether the strategy and tactics of Hezbollah represent those of the next enemy and prepare accordingly. Israel, six years after the second Intifada, on the other hand, found that they had not adequately prepared for the next war.

LEVERAGING NEW MEDIA

During the 33 Day War, Hezbollah demonstrated a refined capability to leverage new media to create positive informational effects. New media such as digital photography, videos, cellular networks and the Internet were used by all parties: the press, Israeli and Lebanese civilians, the IDF, and Hezbollah. One subject matter expert noted how

the ease and speed of transmission and the manipulation of images impacted the war. Israeli soldiers sent cell text messages home, both sides actively used videos of the fighting, and civilians posted still and video imagery on blogs and websites, most notably YouTube.

Participant discussion: Participants recognized that in order to leverage new media, the warfighter must be able to "pre-empt, react, and be adaptive." The focus of discussion was on the factors that currently limit that proposed paradigm. While one combatant command (COCOM) participant cited an existing and effective preemptive planning process and a reactive "blue team" (30 minute) response, most participants felt the COCOMs were not agile enough. There was strong consensus in one group for organizational culture change to facilitate agility. To paraphrase: 'New media is a critical condition of the battlefield, requires doctrine to deal with this reality and requires a massive culture change regarding its use among warfighers.' That proposed change needs to include empowering junior leaders and soldiers to use new media capabilities with minimal clearance (but with rules of engagement) to speed the process of communication. Participants noted that rapid declassification procedures of intelligence products that may have strategic communication value do not exist. Since this process lags, the adversary has an information advantage that is multiplied by the capabilities of new media. Further exacerbating the problem is that over-classification is the rule in current theaters of war. One group noted that: 'everyone is stamping everything secret to begin with and working with rules/policy to declassify; instead it should be done the other way around—use the rules and policy to justify why it shouldn't be classified in the first place.' Finally, the groups addressed the required balance between the speed that new media affords and the accuracy that same speed sometimes sacrifices. While recognizing that there are valid reasons that information flow is sometimes slowed, it is extremely important to provide a response or a proactive statement as soon as practicable. Constraints will often make this response incomplete, but that should not preclude the warfighter from immediately engaging a target audience with the most accurate information that is available with the promise of follow-up.

COUNTERING NEW MEDIA

In the 33 Day War, both Hezbollah and the IDF sought to shape the information environment, and to counter each other's messaging capabilities and content through defensive and offensive information initiatives. The IDF's "countering" campaign was largely offensive and kinetic, seeking to physically destroy Hezbollah's capacity to communicate. By contrast, Hezbollah's strategy was more "defensive," seeking to limit the IDF's ability to use Hezbollah's new media capabilities against itself.

Participant discussion: While participants did discuss countering new media lethally, along with its inherent legal and proportionality questions and obstacles, the focus of discussion was the counter-message. In fact, the group that spent the most discussion time on lethal responses came to the conclusion that 'the future is not to remove the message, but to respond to the message.' This came with a realization that not all countering is productive. Given the openness of the information environment, second and third order effects, with linkages to national security, must be considered before deciding whether to counter adversary new media messaging. With that in mind, the counter-message is often best provided by third party validators. The participants recognized that speed of response was of the utmost importance. One group discussed a "red team" approach, akin to wargaming courses of action in a military planning process. Wargaming gets at "what the bad guy would do" by looking at friendly actions, enemy reactions, and then friendly counteractions. Placed in the context of new media messaging it allows the friendly counter-message to be considered proactively, thus allowing a speedy response. Speed of counter-message could also be facilitated by using rules of engagement for communication as described in the "leveraging" section above.

OPSEC AND NEW MEDIA

The 33 Day War reveals some of the OPSEC challenges that are inherent to the contemporary operating environment. On the one hand, the case study illuminates the challenge of OPSEC for those modern military forces that are drawn from "communication" societies, meaning those awash with instant and readily available communication means, and where the culture of 24/7 connectivity has become a socially accepted norm and expectation. On the other hand, the war showed how a non-state military actor leveraged OPSEC to its advantage: Hezbollah exercised a highly disciplined

approach to OPSEC as an inherent part of its campaign strategy, denying the IDF both operational details and the raw material for psychological operations products (such as casualty figures).

Participant discussion: Two issues dominated discussion of OPSEC and new media. First was the recognition that the warfighter no longer had the ability to control all aspects of OPSEC as in the past. Second was the seeming dichotomy between maintaining OPSEC within military units and telling the proactive and positive stories about military operations quickly, accurately and credibly. New media has enabled individuals with strategic information capabilities such that controlling information is well outside the ability of military commanders. Contractors, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and local community members (among others) with cell phones can report real time information on military operations immediately to any number of sources. Consequently, participants recognized the increasing criticality to consider OPSEC in the planning process in order to mitigate the risk posed by the ubiquity of new media. One group recognized the value of deception to mitigate the OPSEC risk, but also cautioned that deception could cause a loss of credibility with potential long-term effects on future operations. One group in particular grappled with the need to tell the proactive story of military operations as opposed to maintaining strict operations security. Anecdotally, web logs (blogs) served as a discussion topic. Digital natives (primarily younger soldiers) are both comfortable using new media such as blogs while maintaining an expectation that they should be able to communicate freely in the information environment. By the same token, participants noted that younger digital natives appear to have trouble distinguishing between the private and public domains (reference postings to MySpace or Facebook social networks). The consensus of the groups was that a balance must be struck between OPSEC requirements and the use of new media use to tell the good news stories. The keynote speaker addressed this required balance by proffering the four "e's": encourage soldiers to tell their story, but; educate them on the ramifications of messages and the use of new media; empower them by underwriting honest mistakes and; equip them with the proper regulations and policy.

CONCLUSION

New media as a means to achieve strategic information effects is an integral part of today's military operating environment. The United States must compete in this information environment, manage it effectively and recognize its importance. The New Media and the Warfighter Workshop is one step toward recognizing that need and moving to address it. A complete workshop report will be completed by the Center for Strategic Leadership and the SecDev Group in cooperation with workshop participants. Target publication is summer, 2008.

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NEW MEDIA AND THE WARFIGHTER:
WORKSHOP INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

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